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ABSTRACT

"Learning Readiness" is a public school initiative for all 3-4 year old children and their families in Minnesota. The purpose of the Learning Readiness programs is to provide all eligible children with adequate opportunities to participate in child development programs that enable them to enter school with the necessary skills and behaviors as well as the family stability needed for them to progress and flourish. This pamphlet provides an overview of the Learning Readiness programs. The pamphlet describes the components and services of the programs and the types of learning readiness opportunities available; characteristics of program participants; the importance of early education and parental involvement; program funding; partnerships with community programs and services; and the beneficiaries of the programs. (JPB)

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ALL CHILDREN READY TO LEARN...

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2

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WHAT IS LEARNING READINESS?

Learning Readiness is a public school program for all 3-1/2 and 4-year-old children and their families in Minnesota. The purpose of a Learning Readiness program is to provide all eligible children with adequate opportunities to participate in child development programs that enable them to enter school with the necessary skills and behaviors as well as the family stability needed for them to progress and flourish.

Learning Readiness is designed to match a wide variety of services with the needs of participating children. Children with the greatest needs, as identified through an early childhood screening process, receive priority for the more comprehensive services. Local programs strengthen and build upon existing services and resources to meet the health, nutrition, education and social service needs of children to enhance their learning, development and future success in school.

"I've seen my son grow up. He wants to try reading, asks more questions than he used to, wants to sit down and practice things and wants to tell me about what he is learning. He's recognizing acceptable behaviors and demonstrates helpful behavior."

WHAT HAPPENS IN LEARNING READINESS?

All Learning Readiness programs include the following:

- a comprehensive plan to foster collaboration and coordinate existing social service programs for families with young children,
- a development and learning component,
- health referral services,
- a nutrition component,
- parent involvement,
- community outreach and
- community-based staff and program resources.

These components are planned for and implemented locally, based on local resources and collaborative decision making by each Learning Readiness advisory council.

Types of Learning Readiness opportunities vary depending upon community needs. They include:

- half-day preschool programs,
- collaboration with Early Childhood Special Education,
- home visiting with children and parents,
- contracting with Head Start,
- adding a half-day of child-only time to Early Childhood Family Education,
- providing services for parents of children in existing programs,
- parent and child kindergarten preparation,
- programming with family and center-based child care providers,
- linking with family literacy programs and family resource centers,
- transportation assistance and
- other services developed by each community.

Learning Readiness programs recognize that all children do not need identical services, but share a common base: learning experiences must be developmentally appropriate and an integral part of the child's day. Resources follow the child and learning opportunities are provided in a variety of settings as close to home as possible.

WHO PARTICIPATES IN LEARNING READINESS?

Participation is voluntary and services are offered free or for a nominal fee. Fees are waived for families unable to pay. Extensive coordination among community programs and services, parents, policy makers and others is required to assure that children identified through screening as having the greatest needs receive the most intensive and extensive services. These same children are also integrated with other children in lower-cost opportunities such as special events designed for all children and their families. The goal is to enhance the school readiness of all children without labeling or separating them unnecessarily on the basis of socioeconomic status, disability or other characteristics.

"Having transportation really helps. You want to help your kids but when you have a job and have to work and get food on the table, education comes second. Having a bus that picks them up everyday is great."

WHY IS EARLY EDUCATION IMPORTANT?

Evidence on the importance of the critical first years of life is well-established and expanding rapidly. The 1996 Carnegie Corporation report, *Years of Promise: A Comprehensive Learning Strategy for America's Children*, focusing on children ages 3 - 10, captures much of this evidence. According to the report, these years are a time when a firm foundation is laid for healthy development and lifelong learning. During these years children make great leaps in learning, language acquisition and reasoning, corresponding with dramatic brain development. For most children in this age period it is not too late to overcome earlier difficulties nor is it too early to prepare for the challenges of early adolescence and middle school.

"Great way for my child to meet future classmates, to learn new vocabulary each week and become more observant of his world. It made him a better thinker!

WHY INVOLVE PARENTS?

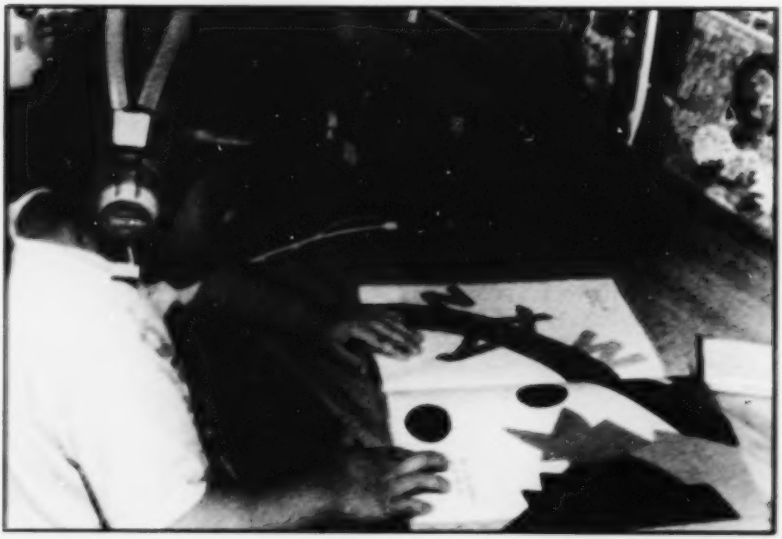
Parents are considered full partners in their child's development and learning. Research shows that early childhood programs involving both parents and children are more effective than programs centering exclusively on the child. Involving families prior to kindergarten encourages parents to play an active role in their children's learning in the elementary years and beyond. Children whose parents create a home environment that encourages learning and who remain involved in their children's education throughout the preschool and primary years earn higher grades than those whose parents are uninvolved.

"I appreciate the interest of staff in helping my son with some very difficult behavior problems. We worked together to plan some goals and strategies and I felt very supported, even as we had to eventually have him tested. I appreciated their assistance in making a referral and helping me accept the planning needed for my son."

HOW IS IT FUNDED AND WHAT DOES IT COST?

State funding for Learning Readiness of $8 million was first made available to Minnesota school districts in 1991. In 1995, $19 million in state funding was allocated for Learning Readiness for the 1996-97 biennium. School district plans for Learning Readiness are reviewed by four state agencies before state funds are made available for local implementation. A variety of local and federal funds are tapped as in-kind contributions to enhance the state funding available for Learning Readiness.

The cost per child for Learning Readiness varies greatly depending upon the type and comprehensiveness of services offered. The average cost per child per year to deliver the program is approximately $400.



"My child has more confidence and less fear about going to school. I think it's a great way to start becoming involved in my child's education, which in my view is as important as the education itself."

HOW DO WE WORK WITH OTHER COMMUNITY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES?

The continuum of services offered through Learning Readiness builds on existing resources in the community. Cooperation and coordination with other programs and agencies to deliver Learning Readiness is critical to program success. Approximately 20,000 referrals to and from other programs each year reflect this. Cooperation, coordination and referrals occur frequently with:

- Early Childhood Special Education,
- Early Childhood Family Education,
- Head Start,
- home and center-based child care providers,
- community preschools,
- kindergarten and early elementary teachers and principals,
- county health and human services and
- many other community agencies and organizations.

"It's really helped out my daughter. I couldn't get her to sit down to learn to count. She would mess around. Now she can count to 5 and is much better with her colors. Learning Readiness helped her to learn that the teacher is in charge and this is the person who she has to listen to. That helped a lot."

WHO BENEFITS FROM LEARNING READINESS?

When the outcomes of Learning Readiness are achieved -- children entering school ready to learn and parents involved in their children's learning and education -- all of society benefits. The potential for early childhood programs such as Learning Readiness to prevent or reduce later learning problems of children is borne out by extensive research. Dollars spent on early education are more than repaid by savings in remedial costs during later school years. This early investment increases the effectiveness of the total investment society makes in education.

"I've been impressed by their ability to treat each child individually. They were very effective with all the children. I also noticed this with the parents; the teachers were able to communicate effectively with all the parents. The teacher had to work hard with me so my daughter would stay. They made both of us feel okay."

Photos courtesy of Ron Gustafson, St. Paul Public Schools

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or the Learning Readiness program
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